

City of Grayling: Cooperative conservation to preserve the AuSable River

by Allen Lowe

In the 1800s, the lumber industry was booming in northern Michigan. Many small towns sprung up as a result of the lumbering activity. One such community is Grayling, in the middle of Crawford County. Many of the other lumber communities in northern Michigan have long since disappeared. Since Grayling is located on the AuSable River, it became the collection point for logs that would be floated to the mills down stream. Eventually, mills were built in Grayling, and the growing community became the county seat.



The AuSable, that now bisects the city, is nationally known as a blue ribbon trout stream. Various restoration and habitat improvement projects have taken place over the years. In addition to fishing, canoeing and kayaking are popular year-round river sports.

The City of Grayling (pop. 1952) has thirteen outfalls from its storm sewer system that discharge directly to the river, draining approximately one square mile of the city. Grayling, like most other communities, has historically disposed of runoff in the quickest manner possible, leading to fluctuating water levels, erosion downstream, and elevated water temperatures. Rain and melting snow flush petroleum products and sediment directly into the river, compromising the delicate ecosystem. Three years ago, a diverse group of local citizens, regional conservation groups, the City of Grayling and state agencies began to investigate the effect this stormwater has on the river.

In December of 2003, with the assistance of the non-profit conservation organization Huron Pines RC&D, the city was awarded a grant of \$758,000 through the Clean Michigan Initiative. The match for the project, \$256,000, came from the city, conservation and fishing

associations, and concerned residents. The grant will fund a three-year project using various low impact development techniques to minimize runoff. Best management practices will also be utilized to remove oils and sediments from the remaining flow. The goal of the three-year initiative is to eliminate more than 80 percent of the direct stormwater discharge to the river.

The AuSable River is unique. It is a large part of Grayling's economic revitalization and provides recreation opportunities for its residents and visitors. The city is now considering a stormwater control ordinance to reduce flow into the sewer system. This pilot project will demonstrate how other communities can voluntarily take the initiative to treat runoff before it enters other unique, high-quality river systems. ♦

Allen Lowe is city manager in Grayling, Michigan. You may contact Allen at manager@cityofgrayling.org or 989-348-2131.